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RWU Law News: The Newsletter Of Roger Williams University School of Law 04-2021

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RWU Law News

The Newsletter of
Roger Williams University School of Law



April 2021

The View from the Statehouse

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Community Connections



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[Watch the video](#)

Gonzalez Named Rhode Island Lawyer of the Year

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[Get details](#)



Making a Difference Together

RWU Law's extended family gathered for an 'online edition' of its signature Champions for Justice event, raising more than \$95,000 for the school's public service legal initiatives in Rhode Island, Southeastern Massachusetts, and beyond.

[Learn more](#)

“I will always lead with equity ...”



Amanda Nagim-Williams, Class of 2021

Amanda Nagim-Williams sets her legal career in motion with a powerful start – as law clerk for history-making New Jersey Superior Court Judge Sheila Venable, the first Black assignment judge for the state's Essex County Vicinage.

[Amanda's Story](#)



State Sen. Dawn Euer '10 (D-Newport) on climate legislation, Newport housing, and the ideological diversity of the RI Senate.

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With drawings and essays, Rhode Island K-12 students answer the question, "How has Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg inspired me?"

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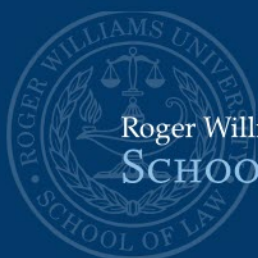
Professor Andrew Horwitz, director of RWU Law's Criminal Defense Clinic, tells WPRI what may lie ahead for Derek Chauvin.

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SCHOOL OF LAW

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The View from the Statehouse

At the Governor's right hand, and on both sides of the aisle in the General Assembly, RWU Law alumni are playing increasingly prominent roles.

April 27, 2021

Michael M. Bowden



At the Rhode Island Statehouse, socially distanced but photographed with a foreshortening lens: (l-r) Brandon Bell '97, Nicole Verdi '14, Kim Ahern '09, Joseph Polisena '15, and Jake Bissaillon '16. Image Credit: RWU Law/James Jones

On March 2, 2021, when Daniel J. McKee was sworn in as the 76th Governor of Rhode Island – succeeding Gina M. Raimondo, who had been chosen to serve as United States Commerce Secretary under President Joe Biden – he found himself in the company of a growing cadre of Roger Williams University School of Law alumni in the upper echelons of Ocean State politics.

On Governor McKee's staff are Director of Policy and Senior Counsel Kim Ahern '09, and Deputy Counsel on Policy Joseph Polisena, Jr. '15. On the legislative side, Jake Bissaillon '16 is Chief of Staff to the Rhode Island Senate President, while Nicole Verdi '14 is Chief Legal Counsel to the Rhode Island Senate President. Meanwhile on the other side of the aisle, Brandon Bell '97 is Chief of Staff to the Senate Minority Leader.

In the Governor's Office

As Gov. McKee's Director of Policy and Senior Counsel, Kim Ahern '09 works closely with cabinet members and the budget office to lead the development of policy recommendations that reflect priorities set forth by the Governor. Formerly Deputy Counsel for Gov. Raimondo – and before that, a Special Assistant Attorney General for nearly a decade, much of it prosecuting cases in the Rhode Island AG's Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Unit – Ahern brings an experienced hand to the job.

She now heads a team of seven policy analysts who, in addition to active policy development, also work with state agencies to track legislation in the General Assembly. At present, their primary focus is ensuring fair and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, and planning the successful reopening of the state's economy, post-pandemic.

"The Governor wants policies that are aligned with a robust economic comeback for all Rhode Island businesses," Ahern said, "while also ensuring that our education system is one in which all students can succeed. In particular, we're finding ways to account for the lost learning time that's occurred over the past year – and to ensure that all of our policies are viewed through an equity lens."

'There is definitely a Roger Williams presence in the statehouse; it's everywhere. RWU Law has become so thoroughly embedded in the Rhode Island legal system – and legal and political overlap.'

~ Nicole Verdi '14, Chief Legal Counsel to the Rhode Island Senate President

She sees her present role as a logical extension of her interests since her days at RWU Law. Even in those days, "I always knew that I wanted to do public service," she said. "I wanted to focus on giving back to my community and working for the common good in government. I was heavily involved in the [Feinstein Institute at RWU Law](#), I did the [Criminal Defense Clinic](#), and was afforded a great opportunity to do a [judicial externship](#) with Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg [of the Rhode Island Supreme Court]. Those are the sorts of experiences that get you out of the brick-and-mortar of the law school and into the Greater Providence legal community, into the larger Rhode Island community. And that's why going to Roger Williams made all the difference in the world for me."

Ahern said her years as a criminal prosecutor also continue to inform her policy work. "That firsthand view of the criminal justice system helps me at a policy level in assessing our criminal justice policies, juvenile justice policies, and Department of Corrections," she said.

Working at Ahern's side is Deputy Counsel of Policy Joe Polisena Jr. '15. With a J.D. from RWU Law and an M.B.A. from Providence College, the former Rhode Island public defender has served as legislative counsel to the Rhode Island House of Representatives and as vice-president of the Johnston Town Council. He remembers being particularly inspired by a law seminar taught by U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) at Roger Williams.

Polisena's role in the McKee administration is more behind-the-scenes than Ahern's. "It involves a lot of research," he explained. "Basically, that means compiling data and information on different policies for the Governor; sitting down with various groups and organizations on both sides of a given issue, gathering as much data as possible, and then drafting a legal memo for the Governor."

Polisena's two main areas of policy interest are transportation and the environment – meaning he spends a lot of time with representatives of the Department of Transportation and the Department of Environmental Management.

"It's gratifying to be involved in public service," he said. "I try to be unbiased in the data that I gather – keeping in mind that there are always two sides to every argument – and I try to be as thorough as possible."

In the General Assembly

Meanwhile, in the General Assembly, **Jake Bissaillon '16** serves as Chief of Staff to the Rhode Island Senate President.

Like Polisena, he has paired his RWU Law J.D. with an M.B.A. from PC. He served as Chief of Staff to the Providence City Council from 2011 to 2014, during Angel Taveras' tenure as mayor. In that capacity, he worked with the Senate, the mayor and the council president on an action plan to eradicate a \$110 million structural deficit.

He chose to study law at RWU Law because it "dovetailed with the network and professional experience I had already built," he said. During his 2L year, he took a job as Policy Analyst for the Rhode Island House of Representatives, which "allowed me to advance my legal education while continuing to focus on where I wanted to head in my career."

Soon after Bissaillon passed the bar, Senator Dominick Ruggerio became Senate President, and sought "a young whippersnapper attorney to provide legal advice, staff support and that sort of thing," Bissaillon said. "Because of my Chief of Staff experience, as well as my fresh-off-the-books legal education – and my willingness to work all hours of the night! – he landed on me as legal counsel" in April 2017. Bissaillon formed a strong working relationship with Ruggerio that eventually led to his appointment as Chief of Staff.

"I've always been willing to walk through a door when it's open and to take on a lot of different jobs at once," Bissaillon said, "not the least of which was going to law school and working at the same time. It was really the flexibility, affordability and access of my Roger Williams legal education that made it all possible. There's no better way to position yourself for a future in the legal world than to use your three years in law school not just to learn about the law, but also to build your network and forge relationships."

Bissaillon said that Covid-19 created a new sense of urgency in the statehouse on many fronts.

“One thing that certainly underpins both the Raimondo and McKee administrations is an understanding that the pandemic put a lot of different things front and center now,” he said. “Both executives have demonstrated a strong willingness to take a strategic approach that takes into account communities of interest across Rhode Island.”

He continued, “Whether it’s access to vaccines or assessing which communities are most impacted by the pandemic and why, these are questions of both economic justice and socioeconomic justice that will impact how we want to emerge from the pandemic – whether we’re talking about the minimum wage or access to affordable healthcare. We have to use ‘the fierce urgency of now’ even when we’re talking in terms of action on climate.”

From the Executive to the Legislative Branch

Meanwhile, Nicole Verdi ’14 has been getting herself up to speed as the new Chief Legal Counsel to the Rhode Island Senate President, working for both the Senate and the Senate President.

When Governor Raimondo announced that she was becoming United States Commerce Secretary, Verdi – who had been serving as Raimondo’s [Deputy Chief of Staff](#) – saw an opportunity in the retirement of the Senate’s longtime Chief Legal Counsel, Richard Sahagian. About a week after Raimondo’s announcement, Verdi was contacted by the Senate President’s office and subsequently offered the position. “I am excited about this opportunity and thrilled that I get to use my legal skills to continue to serve the people of Rhode Island” she explained.

While still in law school, Verdi interned for the Honorable William E. Smith and the Honorable John J. McConnell, Jr. in the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island. After graduating *summa cum laude*, she served as a judicial law clerk for the Honorable Maureen McKenna Goldberg at the Rhode Island Supreme Court before becoming an associate at Adler Pollock & Sheehan in Providence.

Today, as Chief Legal Counsel, she works with the Senate President, majority leader, minority whip, and committee chairs, as well as managing the multiple part- and full-time attorneys who work in the chamber. Their currently focus is, again, on the pandemic, vaccination and reopening; diversity and equity issues; economic security; and climate change.

Regarding the latter, Verdi noted, “The State of Rhode Island has such a significant coastline, we need to be doing everything we can to making sure we’re combating climate change and moving towards the state’s renewable energy goals. I was really excited to see the Act on Climate signed by the Governor [on April 10, 2021; State Sen. Dawn Euer ’10, D-Newport, was, incidentally, the bill’s lead sponsor in the Senate]. This is a big step forward for Rhode Island.”

Verdi said all of her past experiences have informed her current position as well. “There’s no way anyone could be 100 percent prepared for this job, but my time in the Governor’s Office, along with the other experiences that I’ve had, allowed me to hit the ground running on day one. I started in the middle of session – so there will certainly be a learning curve – but I know how

the legislative process works, I know what to look for when reviewing bills and looking for constitutional issues. All of that has helped prepare me for this current role.”

A View From Across the Aisle

Unlike the other RWU Law alumni discussed in this story, all of whom are Democrats, **Brandon Bell '97** is an outspoken Republican. He was, in fact, Chair of the Rhode Island Republican Party from 2015 to 2019, and since January has served as Chief of Staff to Senate Minority Leader Dennis Algiere, and Legal Counsel to the Senate Minority Caucus.

“Republicans are a super-minority in this state,” he noted, “and in our two-party system, having a loyal opposition is critical in my view.”

For the past 24 years, Bell has been a litigator in private practice, working in Massachusetts, Connecticut and, most of all, Rhode Island. Despite being a registered Republican since he was old enough to vote, “I was never outwardly Mr. Politician,” he said.

“I’ve *represented* politicians, both Republican and Democrat, before the Board of Elections, the Ethics Commission, and various other boards and commissions. I’ve represented a city council here, a town council there.” But pre-2011, his actual experience in public office was limited to a four-year stint on the Cumberland, R.I., planning board, along with a few commission and board appointments.

“Then someone had the brilliant idea, ‘Hey, you’re a great public speaker. You’re a trial lawyer. Why don’t you consider being the chair of the state Republican Party?’” Bell recalled, laughing. “So yeah, I ended up leading the party. I was spending 60, 70 hours a week practicing law, and another 40 doing the chairmanship. It’s a strictly volunteer position and it was a lot of work. But being a lawyer helped – knowing and understanding campaign finance laws and ethics commission rules; being able to delve into statutes that public officials might have been a little bit conflicted on sometimes.”

The post also did wonders for his political connections.

“I met some amazing people nationally,” Bell said. “I was traveling a lot. And the level of access was great, particularly after a Republican president got elected. I even was honored to interview with the Department of Justice in D.C. for U.S. Attorney for the District of Rhode Island.” Back home, the *Providence Journal*’s Katherine Gregg described him as the GOP’s “legal bulldog filing one legal challenge after another” against the Democratic leadership.

At the statehouse, “I would help the Republican members of the House caucus and the Senate caucus,” Bell said. “I developed some good relationships here. So when I was asked in January if I’d be interested in becoming Legal Counsel, I said, ‘Are you kidding me? I would *love* to do it!’ In my mind, it was a great change of pace after 23 years of running from court to court all over the place. I love the law and I love politics. Why not combine the two?”

Four months into the job, he has no regrets.

“It’s extremely rewarding work,” Bell said. “There hasn’t been a dull moment. It’s a small caucus, but I have been given the latitude to run with that, to deal with drafting the legislation, and to figure out where we can work together with the other side – and where we can’t.”

‘Camaraderie and Civility’

As for Bell’s relations with fellow RWU Law graduates on the Democratic side?

“Nothing but complete graciousness,” Bell said. “Welcoming and accommodating. I was so impressed with that. Everyone here has been just amazing. I am not talking about partisan matters here, mind you – but if I need something from the ‘third floor,’ as they say in this building, I just have to pick up the phone and I literally get a response within seconds. Regardless of our political differences, there is a work-together mentality. We may disagree on many policy positions, but everyone really does get along. I very much appreciate the camaraderie and civility of the people I work with in this building.”

Verdi credits the law school for some of that civility.

“There is definitely a Roger Williams presence in the statehouse; it’s everywhere,” she said. “RWU Law has become so thoroughly embedded in the Rhode Island legal system – and legal and political overlap. That’s why I always recommend RWU Law – it’s a great law school in general; the experiences I gained there are unmatched. But for people who want to stay and practice in Rhode Island, it’s an absolute must.”

She points to her connection with Kim Ahern. “I was just in awe of the teams that Governors Raimondo and McKee assembled around them; they are all such kind, brilliant, hardworking people – and Kim is one of them,” Verdi said. “During the height of the pandemic, when we’d sometimes be in meetings from seven in the morning until midnight, we called each other ‘battle buddies.’ So now, when I encounter a situation that’s in her wheelhouse, I know I can always give her a call – and she knows she can always do the same with me.”

Bissaillon concurs. “One common factor that runs through both the Raimondo and the McKee administrations *is* Kim Ahern,” he said. “I respect her both as a fellow Roger Williams alumnus – and as an absolute rock star in the building! She was Deputy Counsel for Gov. Raimondo, and now she’s Director of Policy and Senior Counsel for Gov. McKee. That’s not just a strong testament to Kim and her work ethic – it’s an indicator of just how deep RWU Law is starting to run in Rhode Island government. And I think that’s a great thing.”

Inside the 2nd Trump Impeachment

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXp6cQpmNYU>

Professor Gonzalez is 2020 Rhode Island Lawyer of the Year

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January 11, 2021

Barry Bridges, Rhode Island Lawyers Weekly



RWU Law Professor Deborah Gonzalez

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While the past year has likely presented challenges in the daily lives of just about everyone, immigration lawyer and Roger Williams University School of Law [Distinguished Service Professor Deborah S. Gonzalez](#) spent considerable energy in 2020 working on behalf of many whose congregate setting has prevented them from seeking safe haven: immigrant detainees at the Wyatt Detention Center in Central Falls.

In May, Gonzalez and a team of similarly committed public interest attorneys [filed a putative class action habeas petition in federal court](#), claiming the conditions in which the Wyatt ICE detainees were being confined violated their Fifth Amendment due process rights.

Those conditions, according to Gonzalez, include inescapably close social proximity, inadequate cleaning protocols, limited supplies of PPE, and guards who don't always take appropriate precautions.

U.S. District Court Judge Mary S. McElroy found the petition to present a "substantial claim of constitutional error" and granted class certification. In early June, at a time when Wyatt housed 58 ICE detainees, she ordered that each class member be afforded an individual bail hearing.

Gonzalez and her colleagues thus embarked on representing dozens in those hearings, a process that continues today with new detentions.

"The litigation is solely so that civil detainees' due process rights aren't being violated by being subjected to a substantial risk of harm to their health from the COVID virus at Wyatt," Gonzalez says. "It has been a completely new experience for me, because I don't have that much experience in federal court. Going into it, we didn't know a lot about Judge McElroy, because she was fairly new to the bench. Although we haven't won every bail petition, what we have gotten is a thoughtful consideration of each case, and that's all I can ask for."

Gonzalez recently talked with *Lawyers Weekly* about the ongoing litigation and changes to the immigration landscape that might be forthcoming with the changing of the guard in Washington.

Q: How did you become involved in the suit?

A: We actually filed two lawsuits. The first one was in March on behalf of only three plaintiffs who had reached out to the ACLU. They ended up being released by Judge [William E.] Smith.

As for the class action, I consider it a "lesson learned." The COVID situation was new to all of us, and I couldn't figure out how to get calls from my office transferred to my cellphone. So I gave my phone number to the wife of a plaintiff in the first suit. Big mistake. My number went wild at Wyatt and I was inundated with calls from the ICE detainees there. I emailed my team — Jared Goldstein here at RWU; Steve Brown, Morgan Russell and Lindsey Kaley, with the

ACLU; and Natalie Bennett and Susan Manning, from Morgan Lewis — and we decided a class action was the best way to proceed.

These detainees are immigrants living in the United States who have been charged with violating some sort of immigration law. With our petition, you have to consider the government's purpose in detaining them. Their objective, if you will, is strictly to keep track of them. They are civil detainees, not criminal. Immigration has no jurisdiction to issue penalties or sentences; in a nutshell, their role is only to ensure that people coming to the United States have the proper documentation and have been granted authorization to live here through proper government channels.

Q: What kinds of issues are typically discussed in the bail hearings?

A: Judge McElroy put the burden on the government to show that the person would be a danger to the community or a flight risk. In large part, what we argue is the person's immigration history, personal history, and connections inside of the United States, particularly in Rhode Island or Massachusetts. And we discuss any criminal violations.

But we really hammer on the health risks, because the crux of our position is that you're violating the due process of these civil detainees without a legitimate objective.

Again, the government's objective is only to keep track of them, and there is no rational basis for allowing them to run the risk of contracting this very deadly disease.

Q: What success have you seen? Are most detainees released after their hearing?

A: If we were to do a survey of who Judge McElroy released, the majority are folks with non-violent crimes, perhaps drugs or stolen property or that sort of thing. Those accused of more serious crimes like sexual assault or domestic violence for the most part have not been released. I don't have the exact stats, but at a minimum we have assisted 15 to get released through the hearings. Others were released by ICE's own review, and still others have been deported.

As part of the hearing we present a release plan: where the person is going to go, what the health risks are, whether he'll be able to quarantine, how he will attend any criminal hearings. The majority of those granted bail have been released on ankle bracelets, which kind of begs the question: If you can release folks on ankle bracelets, why are you detaining them in the first place? Others have been ordered on home confinement depending on the crime that person is alleged to have committed.

Q: What is happening now with the suit?

A: We're revved up and still in the thick of it. Nine detainees came in last week, five had come in the week before that, and we had additional bail hearings in the second week of December.

Although the number is always changing, in mid-December there were 28 ICE detainees. That number is dramatically lower than when we became involved, in large part because ICE knows

of this lawsuit and the judge's directive that it earnestly take a look at which detainees can be released without a hearing. That requirement is still in place, and I think ICE is taking a good look at the situation, at least consistent with what their definition of "good" is.

But there are still a lot of people in there with severe health conditions. This suit is still viable, and we've continued to ask Judge McElroy to review individual cases.

Q: Will the Wyatt population be among the first to receive the COVID-19 vaccine? Will that bring an end to the litigation?

A: As we're speaking today, vaccinations are beginning in nursing homes and state prisons, but because Wyatt is a quasi-private, quasi-government institution, I can't imagine they'll be first in line.

I would venture to say that once everybody is vaccinated, they'll file another motion to dismiss, and I can foresee a situation where at that point Judge McElroy might grant that. But I think one assurance I would want is that new detainees coming in are also being vaccinated.

Q: What immigration policy changes do you expect to see under the Biden administration?

A: I try not to have too many expectations because [I've been let down other times](#). DACA is back; that's great. And Biden says that, within his first 100 days, he's going to submit a bill for full immigration reform. I really hope he does that, because our system is broken. There are 1.1 million immigration cases pending in the immigration courts right now.

One thing I would really like to see is the next attorney general undoing every immigration decision that Attorneys General [William] Barr and [Jeff] Sessions ever made, because their decisions logically and legally made no sense and undid decades of immigration law precedent, particularly as it relates to asylum law. At a minimum, this new administration should be able to handle that low-hanging fruit easily.

The other problem is that immigration judges are administrative judges, falling under the auspices of the Department of Justice, which is directly under the leadership of the attorney general. Immigration judges can't possibly be impartial if their jobs are in jeopardy when they don't follow the attorney general's orders. It wasn't a secret under the Trump administration that if a judge decided cases in a way contrary to what Barr or Sessions was saying, that judge was fired or demoted. That's what has been happening in the immigration courts. It's a nightmare.

Making a Difference Together

RWU Law's extended family gathered Thursday night for an 'online edition' of its signature Champions for Justice event,

raising more than \$95,000 for the school's public service legal initiatives in Rhode Island, Southeastern Massachusetts, and beyond.

March 15, 2021

Michael M. Bowden



Glimpses of Champions for Justice 2021. Top row (l-r): Dean Gregory W. Bowman, Feinstein Center Director Laurie Barron, RWU President Ioannis N. Miaoulis; middle row: Joshua Xavier '14, 3L Sophia Weaver, U.S. District Court Judge William E. Smith; bottom row: 3L Jessica Insurriaga, RWU Provost Margaret Everett.

It wasn't the packed ballroom event that the Roger Williams University School of Law community has grown accustomed to over the years, but Thursday night's "online edition" of Champions for Justice still delivered an intimate, spirited evening – one that raised a grand total of \$95,495 for the school's pro bono, clinical and externship programs.

And because the law school saved many of the costs associated with a physical event, the funds left for student programming “should be about the same as last year’s net,” said RWU Law Dean Gregory W. Bowman. “That's pretty amazing during a pandemic.”

Champions for Justice is one of the premier annual events for the Rhode Island legal community. “Tonight’s program, because it is online, is different than in previous years,” Dean Bowman noted in introducing the event. “We will not be handing out any awards this evening. We are waiting until next year to do that, when we are all back together in person.”

Instead, Thursday’s event featured inspiring testimonials from two current law students – 3Ls Jessica Insurriaga from El Paso, Texas, and Sophia Weaver of Charlestown, R.I. – and alumnus

Joshua Xavier '14, now an associate with Partridge Snow & Hahn LLP. The three talked in turn with Laurie Barron, director of RWU Law's Feinstein Center for Pro Bono & Experiential Education, about how they benefited from funds raised at past Champions events.

"What started out as an auction at the law school to support our public interest summer stipend program has grown and transformed into a huge gala that raises thousands upon thousands of dollars for the Pro Bono Collaborative, our Alternative Spring Break Program, Clinical Externships, Clinical Law Programs, and our public interest summer stipend program," Dean Bowman said.

"We are Rhode Island's law school, and we are fiercely proud of that. We succeed because of you – and you make us better. Collectively, we are making a difference in Rhode Island and the world."

Fundraising efforts Thursday focused largely on a Silent Auction organized by 3L Cory Lee and featured items donated by RWU Law alumni, faculty, and staff, as well as corporate partners such as Kaplan and Themis (which contributed bar review courses worth more than \$1,000 each). Popular items included a wine-and-cheese board donated by the Feinstein Center; a one-month pass to park in the Dean's parking space in front of the law school; and dinner with four RWU Law deans – Bowman, Bruce Kogan, David Logan, and Michael Yelnosky.

Attendees included students, alumni, faculty, and staff; members of the federal and state judiciary; elected officials; members of the law school's Board of Directors, the Law Alumni Association Board of Directors, and the University's Board of Trustees, and past RWU Law honorary degree recipients, as well as returning Champions for Justice honored in previous years. Besides Bowman, speakers included the RWU President Ioannis N. Miaoulis; RWU Provost Margaret Everett, and the chairman of RWU Law's Board of Directors, U.S. District Court Judge William E. Smith.

Bowman closed Champions for Justice 2021, saying: "If you are a graduate of RWU Law, we are your law school. And if you are *not* a graduate – we are *still* your law school. We are Rhode Island's law school, and we are fiercely proud of that. With your support and your help, we will continue to support the dreams and ambitions of our students, and the work of our great faculty and staff. Everyone here this evening has supported our law school in some way, and we are very, very grateful for that. We succeed because of you – and you make us better. Collectively, we are making a difference in Rhode Island and the world."

RWU Law would like to express its deep gratitude and appreciation to the presenting sponsor of Champions for Justice, Jones Kelleher LLP.; to title sponsors Mandell, Boisclair & Mandell, Ltd., and Robinson & Cole LLP; to program sponsors Adler Pollock & Sheehan PC, Chisholm Chisholm & Kilpatrick Ltd., and the Smith-Kushmerick Family Fund – In Honor of Caitlyn Horbert; and to event sponsors ACS Industries Inc.; Barton Gilman LLP; Cameron & Mittleman LLP; Coia & Lepore Ltd.; Decof, Barry, Mega & Quinn, P.C.; Gonzalez Law Offices, Inc.; Jenna Hashway, Esq. L'11 and John Barylick, Esq.; Higgins, Cavanagh & Cooney, LLP; Howland Evangelista Kohlenberg LLP; Keches Law Group; Locke Lord LLP; Marasco &

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Leading With Equity



Amanda Nagim-Williams, RWU Class of 2021

[Juris Doctor](#)

When she graduates this May, 3L Amanda Nagim-Williams will set her career in motion with a powerful start – clerking for history-making New Jersey Superior Court Judge Sheila A. Venable, who was appointed earlier this year as the first Black assignment judge for that state’s Essex County Vicinage.

“This is something I really wanted to do, and it speaks about working with intention,” Nagim-Williams said. “I told myself that if I was going to clerk, this is the experience I was looking for – and somehow the stars aligned!”

Not that she left matters to chance. Over the past year, Nagim-Williams completed a summer internship with the Youth Advocacy Division of the Committee for Public Counsel Services’ (CPCS) Juvenile Defender Dismantling Racism Subcommittee, which she followed up last fall with an internship at the Middlesex County District Attorney’s office.

The experiences helped instill a fledgling sense of affinity with Justice Venable

“She had a similar trajectory to my own, in that she also has a background in both prosecution and defense work, and she cares deeply about equity and inclusion,” Nagim-Williams explained.

Nagim-Williams’ internships, spanning both sides of the criminal justice system, evoked a similar set of concerns.

“My experience with the district attorney’s office gave me an opportunity to see exactly where I needed to fit in,” she said. “By contrast, I felt that prosecutors – particularly prosecutors of color; and then, to add even more of a dynamic to that, Black *women* who become prosecutors – have a lot of different things working against them. It is hard to work within a system that desperately needs change, when history says there is no place for you on this side of the justice system because of your racial and gender identities.”

From both perspectives, the issue of equity looms large.

“I got a chance to see what equity looks like in the justice system,” she said, “and that is what’s important to me. Given the way the criminal justice system is currently set up, a lot of the power resides with the prosecutor. I am focused on making equitable change and one day having an opportunity to make a larger-scale impact.”

Though Nagim-Williams’ internships took place online due to the pandemic, she said they were still compelling and intense.

“Covid-19 impacted everyone’s plans differently,” she said, speaking of her externship with the DA. “Despite being completely remote, it was a rewarding experience. I was a part of team meetings, stood on the record as an assistant district attorney for the Commonwealth, and had the opportunity to do a lot of things I probably couldn’t have done if I’d been there in person.”

Mona Igram, Nagim-Williams’ supervisor at the CPCS, said the Middlesex DA’s office was “very lucky to bring Amanda on board. We are very supportive of her goals and dreams, and we know that her commitment to racial justice will make her a wonderful advocate for justice in any field she chooses.”

Seeking Racial Justice

Nagim-Williams’ time at RWU Law provided her with further opportunities to explore “the intersectionality between the law and race – or particularly, racial justice.” For example, she has served as an e-board member on the Black Law Students Association, chair of the Honor Board, and student co-chair of the Curriculum, Training, and Programming Subcommittee of the Diversity and Inclusion Steering Committee. Academic work has been useful as well. For example, “my Critical Race Theory course really helped me find tangible places in the law and in our history through which I can help make the world a little bit better,” she said.

All of which has confirmed her original instinct in choosing RWU Law over other institutions around the country which she had also considered. A Boston native, Nagim-Williams said Roger Williams struck her as an institution that reflected her commitment to and passion for racial equity in the justice system.

“I saw students involved in work I could see myself doing,” she said. “I really appreciated their commitment to doing the work and I appreciated that there was a space for that – a willingness to push the envelope and change things, which isn’t something you’ll necessarily find at another law school.”

Its status as Rhode Island’s only law school also factored into her decision.

“That uniquely positions RWU Law to be a trendsetter in a number of ways,” she said. “It helps to build connections with the legal community within Rhode Island, and that was very attractive.”

Because at the end of the day, it’s all about the work.

“I will always use my platform of privilege – whatever that looks like – to seek equity in the legal field,” Nagim-Williams affirmed. “That starts with being accountable, and being brave when encountering really uncomfortable situations. It comes from having principles that won’t waver irrespective of your title or what side of the criminal justice system you’re on. No matter where I go, I know I can say this: I will always lead with equity.”

State Sen. Dawn Euer (D-Newport) is the guest this week on Political Roundtable.

[The Public's Radio](#) · [Talking with state Senator Dawn Euer](#)

Joining me on the panel this week are URI emeritus professor of political science Maureen Moakey and Antonia Ayres-Brown, Newport reporter for The Public's Radio.

Here's is an edited transcript of our conversation.



Euer was first elected in 2016. GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Donnis: Let's start with the unveiling this week of Providence City Council president Sabina Matos as Gov. Dan McKee's choice to be Rhode Island's next lieutenant governor. There was a field of more than 80 people who were hoping to land this job. Senator Euer, one of the other

finalists was your Senate colleague, Louis DiPalma, a thoughtful lawmaker from Middletown known as a good policy guy. Do you think the most qualified person was selected by Governor McKee?

Euer: Well, you know, I appreciate the process that Gov. McKee went through and I think having an open call for applications brought new names in front of the in front of the governor's staff. And so, you know, I'm not privy to the interviews. I greatly respect Senator DiPalma. I know that he works hard for his constituents. He would have worked hard in the role as lieutenant governor, but I'm excited for Sabina, for Lieutenant Governor Matos, and you know, we'll obviously get the opportunity to have her in front of the Senate as well.

Donnis: Maureen, Gov. McKee dismissed the idea when I asked him at his news conference this week, whether strategic considerations were a major factor in the choice of Sabina Matos for his lieutenant governor. But is it really possible to take the politics out of a political consideration like this?

Moakley: No, I don't think it's possible to take the politics out of it. But I do think she was an obvious choice substantively, as well as strategically. And the sort of frustrating thing about having this foderol about 80 people interviewing. I mean, she was one of the five front runners. I sort of disagree with the senator, in the sense that while I it makes sense to have the five finalists acknowledged, before the constitution was amended in the 90s, all state legislators could sit in one committee and nominate judges, but it was strictly pro forma. It was an honor. So I think with the five people, it fell into that category, at least acknowledging their talents and honoring them. But 80 people, college students, when the governor is saying that this is a very important position, struck me as a little over the top,

Donnis: This did kind of become Rhode Island's version of American Idol. But that notwithstanding, Antonia, what kind of things have you been hearing from people in the Newport area about this whole process in the selection?

Ayres-Brown: You know, in my early conversations with local leaders, I have heard some disappointment that Senator DiPalma from Middletown was not chosen. Obviously, being a top five candidate, some people had hoped that he would bring an Aquidneck Island perspective to state leadership, which many people view as being Providence-centric. That being said, the first reactions I've heard have been fairly optimistic. Generally, people have said they're pleased that McKee picked someone who has experience at the city level and will view issues very locally. And also, Matos being the first person of color has resonance, significance, even in cities where she has not, to this point played a particularly large political role.

Donnis: Let's switch to some questions for our guest, state Senator Dawn Euer. Senator, you are the Senate sponsor of a major environmental bill, known as the Act on Climate. This is intent on making Rhode Island net zero on carbon emissions by 2050. Gov. McKee says he supports the intent of the legislation, but he's raised a concern. He says the legislation as written would allow too many parties to file lawsuits that would result in protracted and costly litigation against the state, in his view. is he right?

Euer: Look, I mean, this is landmark legislation that has been passed by both chambers of the General Assembly. And it's critical that we address the climate crisis. It's critical that we are in front in being able to craft a plan that works for Rhode Island. This energy transition is coming. All signs point to that. This bill sets us up to be able to make sure that we're leveraging the knowledge on a local level and being able to access federal funds; There was another Biden announcement about stimulus and funding that's going to come down.

With regard to this specific lawsuit provision, that was litigated heavily on the House floor during their debate. It was discussed during our committee hearings. You have to understand a version of this bill has been introduced since 2008. And that consideration was taken up. And the reality is that the citizen suit provisions are very common in environmental law. And the recovery is only injunctive relief. So basically, if somebody does sue the state, basically, the state just has to

follow the law. And I'm confident that once the governor and his team get a full look at the bill, that their concerns will be eased. And they will see that this bill is a big win for the state of Rhode Island.

Donnis: One of the other concerns raised about this legislation is how it would affect homeowners and car owners. Let me ask about a particular example: if someone heats their home with natural gas, how would they be affected by this?

Euer: Sure. So there's been a ton of misinformation out in force about this legislation since it has passed both chambers. It's no surprise to me that a lot of that misinformation is coming from the local Koch brother groups, fossil fuel-backed groups. The great thing about this legislation, it directs the state to create a plan on how to get to net zero. So there isn't any specific designation towards individual homeowners, there isn't any specific designation towards businesses. In fact, to go back to the citizen suit provision, the lawsuits would be against the state. The state needs to do the plan. There's nothing in here that opens up individuals who are homeowners or businesses to that type of litigation.

Donnis: And a homeowner with a natural gas system, you're saying they would not need to worry about having to install some costly other system within 10, 15, 20 years?

Euer: Well, the great thing about this is that it puts the plan out over over 30 years, right? So we've got interim goals. And then we have the long-term goals. And I will tell you that there's been a heating sector transformation report, there's initial studies, there's a lot of reports flying around. But I will tell you our technology 30 years from now, by the time this plan gets fully executed, will look a lot different than what it does today.

Ayres-Brown: Senator, you've also been focusing on the issue of short-term rentals like AirBnB, which play a big role in housing availability in Newport and other coastal communities here. Do you think addressing the issue will require ultimately having fewer of these short-term rentals? And to what extent do cities like Newport need to tackle this

alongside things like the second-home market, which others point to as driving housing prices up?

Euer: Yeah, that's a great question. Everyone's started talking about the fact that we are in a housing crisis. It's not just an issue in Rhode Island, it's an issue nationally. How that manifests itself is different in coastal communities such as Newport that have, as you're saying, the short-term rental second homeowners, this is hugely problematic. And I don't think we can truly address the housing crisis without wrapping our head around how to address that issue as well.

Ayres-Brown: Do you think that addressing short-term rentals will require having fewer of them than there are now in these cities?

Euer: I do. And I do think that some of that is going to end up working itself out from just the market perspective. Because I think right now, the real estate market is booming. But the reality is the you know, there's been a lot of stories about folks who bought a home or a second home wanting to do the third-party rental. But you know, then COVID happened and they were no longer able to do that. The reality is the way that the prices are flowing, I think that people are going to continue to get priced out of that market.

Moakley: Well, given the lack of a budget shortfall, it seems the legislature now has introduced plans, for example, to reinstate COLAs for some state workers, and another proposal to eliminate the state tax on paycheck protection checks, as well as the benefits for unemployment. While these seem laudable individually, there's another argument that says that we should resist the impulse to spend more money on more programs in the short term. And think about this stimulus in terms of strategic long-term transformational projects. Is the legislature resisting these impulses, and how do you feel about this debate?

Euer: So I think that we need to learn lessons from previous recessions and depressions. And we need to think about building an economy that works for those in the middle and those at the bottom. What we have seen in COVID is that those who can least afford to get laid off, those who

can least afford to lose their job, are the first in line of getting evicted, are the first in line for losing their economic security. I think that we need to make sure that we're prioritizing items in the budget that are making sure that we're having a recovery that works for working class Rhode Islanders.

And I think that, you know, some of the specifics that you mentioned, I mean COLAs for retirees. You know, we just talked about housing. That's a good example. I have people who are retirees on a fixed income in Newport, they've had the family home that they've owned for decades. Now there's somebody who bought a property next door, flips it. Now, all of a sudden, the appraisals are skyrocketing through the roof, and they can't afford their property tax. You know, so the cost of living adjustment is really intended to make sure that folks can afford the cost of living as it increases. I think we need to do it responsibly. I think we need to be thoughtful. But I think we absolutely need to be focusing on an economy that works for people.

Moakley: What about big ideas? What about this transformational argument?

Euer: Yeah, I think that, quite frankly, thinking about our economy in a way that it's people-centered is transformational. When you're talking about economics, there is a lot of economic theory that has been perpetuated over years that is focused on trickle-down economics -- which we have seen is not working. I've seen reports that talk about we're entering a Gilded Age 2.0 in the way that our finances and the way that our economy is structured. And you know what we tax and what we don't tax, and who we tax and who we don't tax, are just as important questions. Because at the end of the day, when you have the low-income Rhode Islanders paying a much higher percent of their take home pay than the wealthiest among us, you know, we're at a structural disadvantage. And we're structurally disadvantaging the people of our state. And I think that we should have some transformational thinking about how we approach these conversations,

Donnis: Senator Euer, you were first elected in 2016. So you've seen how the Senate has become a much more ideologically diverse chamber. It used to be the Republicans, by and large, agreed with the Democrats. But now you have people who are very far right, like Senator Elaine Morgan from Hopkinton, and people who are very far left, like Senator Tiara Mack from Providence. Has this greater ideological diversity made the Senate better or worse?

Euer: I think it's a reflection of our country. Right now, we're having trouble right now in this country being able to talk to each other and hear each other and listen to different viewpoints. And there is an element of that I think in the conversations in the Senate, trying to make sure that we can come together, still have conversation still have robust dialogue around the policies in front of us. But I think that this is exactly what representative democracy looks like. It looks like a wide range of perspectives and voices that come to the table and wrestle with difficult policy positions in front of us.

Donnis: The most sensitive question comes last Where's your favorite place to go for pizza?

Euer: A1 Pizza is right up the street for me.

Ian Donnis can be reached at idonnis@ripr.org. Follow him on Twitter [@IanDon](https://twitter.com/IanDon). Sign up [here](#) for his weekly RI politics and media newsletter.

Meet the RBG Essay Contest Winners!

With drawings and essays, Rhode Island students answer the question, "How has Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg inspired me?"

March 3, 2021

Michael M. Bowden



The winning RBG artwork by Millin Licht of the Jewish Community Day School in Providence.

Last December, Roger Williams University School of Law invited Ocean State students from grades K through 12 to submit essays and artworks on how they have been inspired by the legacy of late Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg of the Supreme Court of the United States, who passed away on September 18, 2020.

As part of the prize, *Rhode Island Lawyers Weekly* agreed to publish the winning entries. The winning students also received cash prizes and books.

“Justice Ginsburg cared about equality for all people,” said RWU Law Professor Emily Sack, who advises the Women’s Law Society, which co-sponsored the contest, with its members serving as judges. “When she started her fight for women’s equality under the law, it seemed like an impossible task, but she worked hard and persisted, and made great strides for the things she believed in.

“She also knew that this is not something she could accomplish alone, and that we all have a part to play in making a better world,” Sack added. “She famously said, ‘Fight for things you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.’ We thought this essay contest would be a wonderful way for all of us, and especially our state’s students, to be inspired by Justice Ginsburg’s life and her call to action.”

The response was gratifyingly large and enthusiastic, and the judges found themselves making some very hard choices. But the winners have been selected and (drum roll) they are:

- Elementary School (original piece of artwork)

Millin Licht, *Jewish Community Day School, Providence*

- Middle School Winner (one-page essay)

Mairead Lapierre, *Lawn School, Jamestown*

- High School Winner (two-page essay)

Jasmine Stevens, *St. Mary Academy - Bay View, East Providence*

And now, without further ado, here are the winning entries.

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Breaking Glass Ceilings

By Millin Licht, *Jewish Community Day School, Providence*



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Jackpot and Ruth Bader Ginsburg

By Mairead Lapierre, *Lawn School, Jamestown*



Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg once said, “Fight for the things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” RBG has inspired me in my life to fight for the things I care about.

RBG inspired me by not being afraid to work with almost all men. The first time I saw the boys playing Jackpot at recess, I thought “that looks fun.” There were seven boys throwing and catching a football and yelling out numbers and different sayings, like “Pac Man” and “Mystery Box,” as they were throwing the ball. There were no other girls playing with them. I was really bothered, because while the boys were playing Jackpot, all the girls were playing Four Square.

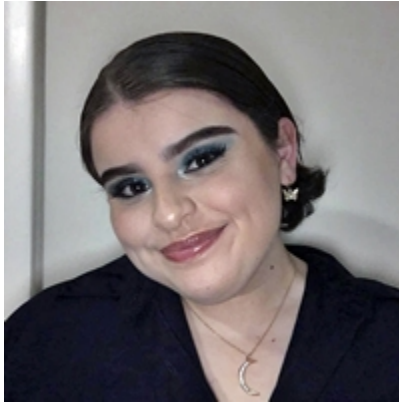
I went over to the boys and asked if I could play Jackpot with them, because it looked like fun and I wanted to try playing something new. The boys said that I had to be able to throw and catch a football. I remember getting ready to throw the football and all the boys moved up close to me—clearly thinking I wouldn’t be able to throw the ball far. I threw the football in a spiral just like my Dad taught me and it went over their heads. Steve turned to Liam and said, “She throws better than you!” My throw impressed them enough, and they let me join the game. Once the other girls saw me playing, a few of them came over and asked if they could play, too. Steve asked them, “Can you throw the ball?” And I said, “Just let them play!” And the boys let them play.

RBG has inspired me in my life to help adjust things that are not equal. She inspired me to play games with boys, and that got some girls to join so that it wasn’t just boys playing with boys and girls playing with girls.

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A Seat at the Table

By Jasmine Stevens, *St. Mary Academy - Bay View, East Providence*



Ruth Bader Ginsburg was the epitome of a visionary. She knew what the world could be, and she sought to ensure that her vision became reality. Ginsburg was undeniably a mastermind, her levels of valor and genius were truly unmatched. And even though she grew up in a world where she was told to be quiet and proper by the society around her, she never let that affect her goals and ambitions.

Ginsburg's mind worked like clockwork: everything had a place and, if all parts were moving together and correctly, the clock would tick in harmony. She held herself with a silent confidence: she had nothing to prove, no need to justify herself or her actions, no second guessing, just her self-assurance keeping her going. I aspire to acquire the level of confidence she held, and use her as the visualization of what that would look like.

Ginsburg accomplished so much throughout her career. She adjusted with the times and, most of all, she was an excellent listener. She had the ability to empathize with those around her; the ability to see things from a third person's perspective. She was able to step back and view things from the perspective of those she was listening to, and to understand the disproportionate ways in which individual policies affected certain marginalized groups. Ginsburg seemed to hold all the qualities of an empath, in ways that make me want to see the world in the way she saw it. Her actions have made me strive to be more understanding and compassionate, to think of others and not only myself.

I cannot even fathom into words the level of genius which she possessed. The execution of her argued Supreme Court cases were unbelievably and undeniably brilliant. When I first listened to her court hearings, I was confused at first. I struggled to understand why she was so keen on finding male gender bias victims. It was upon hearing and reading the *Califano v. Goldfarb* case that it all clicked. Ginsburg got the judges to unknowingly admit the existence of gender bias, an institution they refused to admit exists. Instead of attempting to discuss gender bias against women, where it was strongest, to non-listening ears, she thought to establish it first against men: genius.

Ginsburg understood that people, especially men, did not believe in gender bias, especially against women. Instead of trying to explain that gender bias against women existed, a topic that was and is still currently being forced into silence, she established gender bias against men. In establishing that gender bias against men existed, she established that the fundamental idea and policy of gender bias does in fact exist. And in establishing its overall existence, she established that gender bias against women exists as well. It never ceases to amaze me to look back on Ginsburg's accomplishments. This case specifically taught me that when people won't listen to what you have to say, you must make them listen. It taught me that tactical skill and execution are just as important as the facts in front of you, and that confidence in the information you are relaying is so utterly important.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg taught me to not apologize for existing in a world where the odds are stacked against me, to question outdated and biased authority, and make the world a place I can openly and happily exist in. Not only was Ginsburg a women's rights activist, but she was also an LGBTQ+ ally. She fought against racial injustice, and sought to abolish classist infrastructures within this country. Ginsburg taught me to be confident in who I am, and to fight for what I believe in. She told me and many other girls my age and those older, that we deserve our seat at the table.

While we may have to fight for it more than our male counterparts, we are every bit as deserving as those who have been handed a seat, if not more. Ginsburg earned all that she had. She paved her own path, made her own way in this world, and that is exactly what I intend to do. This past year of 2020 has taught me to be myself even if society will not accept me for it. And with Justice Ginsburg's guidance throughout my adolescence, I feel as though I'm finally owning my identity.